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On Books

NONFICTION

The musings of a critic

Autumn Rhythm: Musings On Time, Tide, Aging, Dying and Such Biz

By Richard Meltzer
Da Capo Press
224 pages, $22.50

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By ANDREW PARKS
News Book Reviewer

Richard Meltzer is an arrogant, sneering narcissist, a bit of a (insert favorite expletive here) depending on whom you ask. Which is why he's a natural when it comes to criticism, one of the greatest to spill red ink over the failings and frailties of rock records.

"I invented . . . Rock writing," he wrote in his last collection, "A Whore Like the Rest." "Well, maybe not the literal first, just one of the first two-three-four, probably the first to take the ball and actually run with (it)."

Such blunt egotism is absurd, infuriating even. Yet there's little denying the impact of Meltzer's "Aesthetics of Rock," the 1970 tome that pioneered the art of overanalyzing pop songs and married philosophy to music. Added to such peers as Lester Bangs and Robert Christgau, early rock criticism uncovered meaning in the melodies of the Beatles and Beach Boys, subtleties once deconstructed from the movements of Mozart. Couple that with a cutting sense of humor and lack of restraint, and the first wave of music criticism parallels the revolutionary writing of more recognized New Journalists such as Tom Wolfe — only with much more pomposity.

Given Meltzer's tendency to brag more than a platinum-toting rapper, it's intriguing to see his guard lowered in his self-proclaimed "geezer book," "Autumn Rhythm: Musings on Time, Tide, Aging, Dying and Such Biz." At an age hovering on the cusp of senioridom, Meltzer is at that unsettling period when black hair turns ashen and AARP newsletters start landing in your mailbox. Relatively speaking, he's not that old. Yet his days don't fly by anymore. They run. His memory's gauzy (rather than cloudy, hindered by "d.c." (diminished capacity) and "geezer episodes." His daily routine's insane. Writing is becoming a chore, a "15 round fight" with writer's block. And, hell, he can't even remember what gears are anymore.

To hear a writer as witty and animated as Meltzer meditate on what we all fear — death and aging — is invigorating. Enough trees have been wasted for self-help sap and new-age pap on the subject, prose that urges readers to accept death and recontemplate life. Boo. Meltzer is as human as writers come, unafraid to share his inadequacies and embarrassments, yet humorous enough to bypass bouts of self-loathing. So joining his highway-to-hell narrative is entertaining and insightful rather than preachy and irritating.

His naked approach to personal topics is clearest in the pages devoted to his senile mother and deceased father. His father is portrayed as submissive and lonely, a softie who's only friend was his son. And Meltzer isn't afraid to admit that he hated him for being a pushover right until his final days, which were spent brain dead suffering from Parkinson's, plopped in front of a television watching the bloody aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing.

His mother is shown as the master of the house, a strict matriarch who is "not much of a nurturer. Beyond my academic record and other markers of the Great Nurbin', she had virtually no interest in the workings of my soul." The pair's relationship is especially intriguing, at times Oedipal (illustrated in a six-page poem most writers wouldn't dare include or even write), humorous (Meltzer flavoring her paltry cooking "out of survival") and sad (present day conversations that alternate between mad laughter and her struggle to even remember Meltzer's name).

Though it may appear that way, the book's hardly a funereal dirge of weepy-eyed, light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel, self-flagellation. Even the direst passages are contrasted with Meltzer's offbeat approach. His thoughts on the ultra-mudane age in the section "The Wisdom in Our Underwear" are especially priceless. Meltzer's first computer, complete with a monochrome monitor, arrived in '91. He caved when an editor told him to either start submitting his work digitally or rewrite each piece in the office. "Where once all anyone needed t' write was a pencil, suddenly you had to IN-VEST IN all this ugly machinery, the equivalent of a washer-dryer-aircondit(ner," he writes.

More than a decade later, he still loathes the idea of our Orwellian society and the Internet. The only site he claims to log onto regularly is a sumo wrestling page. He writes, "As imitations-of-life go, have arty, writ large, been shabbier than the Internet?"

At times, Meltzer does come off as an embittered old codger, spewing when-I-was-your-age denunciations from behind a rickety old typewriter. This is clearest in his recollection of the '60s, a decade he's both skeptical and protective of. He refers to the media's portrayal of the counter-culture as "too kneejerk an Us-versus-Them, too fat and specific, a brand new style sheet" and notes that "alternative culture came to **mean nothing** more, nothing less, than alternative product." Ironic considering how much "alternative" culture is marketed to teens today, from Hot Topic to MTV.

Richard Meltzer lowers his guard.

Throughout the text, Meltzer is as scathing as ever. When talking about Paul McCartney's retooling of the Beatles catalog, he writes, "What is this cheesepuff solipsist worth, 8 billion dollars? Why can't he leave this . . . alone?" He even digresses into an attack on the government's treatment of the HIV crisis at one point. In four pages packed with damning statistics and telling observations, he manages to slam foreign policy on birth control and women's rights, as well as claim that the idea of AIDS is intended to "scare the sex out of everyone."

Taken together, this collection of essays and slapdash collage of poetry and prose is a triumph, a book about mortality that makes you feel more alive than halfway dead after reading its 200 pages. Credit Meltzer's typical conversational tone and light mood for that. Like the Beats and New Journalists, Meltzer writes outside the lines, ignoring the principles of punctuation and grammar. Words are invented mid-sentence (love that "cornucopially"), asterisks and exclamation points sandwich thoughts and syllables, and cap-locked letters become shouted proclamations.

It's writing that means life. And pretension that's welcome. We're all on the road to a destiny six feet under. So, why not make the journey a bit more tolerable by spending an afternoon with Old Man Meltzer?

Former News writer Andrew Parks is a staff writer at Entertainment Weekly.

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